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The Good Samaritan

I don't know about you, but I often forget that the Good Samaritan is not just a random story Jesus told one day to try and get people to be nicer to each other.

Some people think that you know. In fact for some people this is the story by which they measure Christianity.

Are followers of Jesus more likely than non-Christians to help someone in need?

Did you see the July 8th newspaper article which reported that residents of metropolitan Milwaukee are more likely to lend a helping hand at their local school, church or youth center than people in most other metro regions?

The Milwaukee area was ranked eighth among 50 of the nation's largest metropolitan areas for its volunteer rate, and one of the explanations given was, "Catholic and Lutheran traditions" "...which give us a strong history of helping our fellow neighbors...making sure that people are fed and making sure that people are clothed . . ."

"From 2004 to 2006, an average of 34.4% of metro Milwaukee residents volunteered at least once a year.

If you think about it though, is 34% all that great, for volunteering even as little as once a year? That would mean of course that the big majority of our area DOESN'T volunteer even as little as once a year to make sure that people are fed and clothed and given basic medical care.

And how many of those 34% would you say, are Christians? And what would the percentage be for Our Savior's Lutheran Church, if someone were to carefully survey us this year?

Now lest the 65.6% of us squirm a little bit in our seats, and think well I've been really too busy this year for that sort of thing or, before the 34.4% of us start feeling a little too self satisfied & think well, I'm going on the Appalachian Service Project next week, or I volunteer hours at Cooperating Congregations of Waukesha County this month,

Let's get back to the actual context of the Good Samaritan story in the Bible, and we quickly realize it's not a random feel good story Jesus tells one day, it is a story Jesus told as an *answer* to a specific burning religious question.

Do you remember what the original question was?
 "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

He's a hot young lawyer who's coming to test Jesus that day.

You probably know somebody like that, today, a brilliant young mind, who likes nothing better than to show off his bright lights, by raising his (or her) hand, raising that hand up in the back of the classroom to ask a question they hope will make them look good. I've done my homework, teacher. I read all the chapters and then some, teacher, and here's my question.

In this case here in Luke 10 the question may seem blasé enough: Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

Yeah, yeah, blahblahblah thinks the rest of the class..

But if you've been worshipping with the Lutheran branch of the Christian Church for any length of time, I would think *you* would sit up and notice.

What must I DO to inherit eternal life? We Lutherans aren't expected to DO anything to inherit eternal life, we're saved by grace!

The Catholics, well, we know that they have to go to mass every week, and Evangelicals have to tithe their before tax incomes, but we Lutherans, we're free from all that! We don't have to DO anything!

But maybe Jesus hadn't heard about Martin Luther & the 16th century reformation, because Jesus answers this question with THE STORY of the good Samaritan and what he DOES.

Could we Lutherans have it all wrong? Go and do likewise" Jesus says. Could it be that helping the poor is the very thing that will save us after all?

Three Good Samaritan stories I've heard first hand from three people this week:

Story #1 First, A college student. Lets call him Jerry, earning decent money working two summer jobs . Jerry sees a homeless man riffling through the garbage at an ice cream shoppe, watches the guy put in his mouth a half eaten sandwich he finds there. Jerry was raised in the church but doesn't believe in God much and doesn't go to church if he can help it, but Jerry goes up to the guy, and gives him not his spare change, not a religious tract on how to find God, but ... he gives him \$40. It's what he had in his pocket.

Story #2 An African American gentleman runs out of gas in the Lake Country area, where he is very conspicuous walking down the highway with an empty gas can. He is some distance from his vehicle, nobody seems interested in stopping and helping him out. A young working single Mom, lets call her Megan, just filled up her tank at the gas station, noticing immediately that gas is up to \$3.48 a gallon. She remembers just a few years ago when she could only afford to buy \$5 worth of gas at a time. She remembers running out of gas once because even back then \$5 wouldn't necessarily get you as far as you needed to go. She sees the African American gentleman, and she stops, and she helps him to get the gas he needs to go where he needs to get to.

Story #3

My niece, a second year medical student, is spending her summer in Tanzania: Now you have to know that my niece, K., has led a pretty plush life, growing up in an affluent home. As far as I can tell, one of the biggest challenges of her 22 years was when she left for college and she lost her bedroom suite to her younger sister, & had to endure winter breaks at home in the bedroom with a bathroom she had to share with her younger brother. *(don't tell her I told you all this)* Now she's in Tanzania this summer, and listen to this, one of her first emails home:

HOME STAY FAMILY

Last night was my first night at home with my home stay family. Their home is far beyond my expectations (I have a flushable toilet complete with seat!) and they are a really nice family. They live in a compound with my Baba's (father's) brothers, their families, and his parents. They have a bunch of banana trees and nice gardens so we get a lot of fresh fruits and veggies ... I met a sister-in-law of my "parents" who is also 22 but married with a 2 and a half year old kid...that's a bit weird. My parents have a 5 year old who promptly started crying when he walked into the house and saw me there (kids are not used to white people) but now we are buddies and he wants to show me everything he does and wants to look at the pictures in the Ohio book I brought them constantly. I noticed throughout the night that he was coughing a lot whenever he ran or if he was talking a lot and at one point I was patting his back while he coughed and his father explained to me that something was hanging down from the top of his mouth and touching his tongue which was causing him to cough. I asked if I could look in his mouth and I saw that it was his tonsils...they were ENORMOUS...we were shown a picture of tonsils this size (actually a bit smaller) by one of our professors who told us that he had never seen any that large before. My Baba told me that they are just waiting for Simon to grow and hopefully the tonsils will shrink because there is nothing the doctors can do for him here. In the States, tonsils that size would have been out ages ago, but here the surgery is too dangerous and too expensive. Even a family that is relatively well off, like mine is, cannot have their son's tonsils removed.

I quite sure that K. will do something for this 5 year old and his tonsils, or at least for the family.

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Are these stories exactly what Jesus has in mind with his Good Samaritan story? That people who bear his name as Christians should score way higher than 34% volunteering each year to help the poor?

Or is Jesus simply saying, "Stick with me, and I'll show you what eternal life in the kingdom of God even looks like.

It looks like this: some college kid personally handing over a gift, to a man eating sandwiches from the garbage.

Some young Mom personally helping a guy fill up his can of gas.

Some smart “rich kid” realizing that she’s got the chance to change the whole life of a five year old and his family.

Go and do likewise says Jesus. And maybe the point is, that in the process of trying to be good Samaritans and good neighbors, we figure out how far we always fall short, and how it’s all about grace, after all. The Story Teller’s grace. The grace of Jesus, who after all, gave not 34%, not 65% but 100% for the poorest of them all, you my fellow sinner, and me.

Amen.